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The American public school must depend for its strength on the support of local citizens who understand school affairs. The task of interpreting school affairs to the public is an administrative function and requires both information programs and enlistment of community support. Organized programs are needed in which (1) community relations needs are defined, (2) goals are developed, (3) objectives are identified, (4) programs and activities are organized with alternatives being considered, and (5) needed resources are identified and mobilized. A related document is EA 001 558. (TT)

Improving Your School-Community Relations Program

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SFUL SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION SERIES

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Improving Your School-Community Relations Program

Improving Your School-Community Relations Program

by Gene C. Fusco

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ORGANIZING THE PROGRAM

It is generally agreed that the American public school must depend for its strength and vigor on the support of local citizens, and that, in turn, the interest and support of citizens depend on their understanding of school affairs. The corollary of these two facts is that the school administrator, carrying out his primary objective of improving the educational opportunities of all children and youth, is obligated to maintain an effective school-community relations program.

The overriding educational challenges administrators face, now and in the years ahead, are: *Will citizens be willing to provide the moral and financial support needed to upgrade and strengthen the schools in order to meet the growing complexities of a rapidly changing society? How can we help citizens obtain and use the information they need to understand school policy, programs, and services in order that they may participate more meaningfully in school affairs?*

SCR—An Administrative Function

The job of interpreting school affairs has always been difficult. Now, however, a number of factors are making it even more so: increasing size of school districts and the growing complexity of operating them; continued specialization in administration and instruction; and competition among agencies, institutions, and

groups for the time and attention of citizens. Alert administrators recognize the job as necessary and difficult and make the effort necessary to develop and maintain an effective program.

The nature of the task has changed over the years, from school "publicity campaigns" common during the first two decades of this century, through the "continuous publicity" approach of the 1920's and the "educational interpretation" movement of the 1930's and early 1940's.

In the late 1940's still another concept emerged, one which was designed to bring a fuller dimension to the conventional school public relations activity by emphasizing the need for school and community *interaction* through citizen participation in school affairs. That process has been called "school-community partnership," or "school-community cooperation," or simply "school-community relations." The latter term will be used in this booklet, shortened to SCR.

Although the definition of an effective program may vary from community to community, more and more administrators are recognizing that all programs require twin efforts: to raise the level of public understanding through information programs, and to enlist community support by drawing citizens into meaningful participation in school affairs.

Management by Objectives

The school administrator's uneasiness about his effectiveness in improving school-community relations stems partly from the sheer size and complexity of the task. Administrators are increasingly disturbed that many school bond issues repeatedly fail at the polls; that school tax levies are often turned down by an overwhelming majority of the voters; that there is modest attendance by citizens at school functions; that citizen activity in behalf of schools reaches its highest level among parents with children in elementary school; that there is vast public ignorance about school matters; and only a small minority of citizens in the community actually participate in school affairs.

Perhaps the basic reason that many school-community rela-

tions programs flounder is that they are not organized programs at all. Too often school administrators adopt a "fly-by-the-seat-of-the-pants approach," use guesswork to plan and evaluate their programs, and merely copy the SCR practices of other school systems which appear to be successful.

In developing an organized and systematic approach to the task of improving school-community relations programs, the following progressive steps are recommended: define the needs, develop the goals, identify the objectives, organize appropriate programs and activities following consideration of alternate approaches, and mobilize school and community resources to carry out the programs.

"Management by objectives" is a means of insuring sound planning. Planning begins with a deliberate delineation of the fundamental *needs* of the clientele to be served and describes why these needs ought to be met. Because community needs may differ markedly, the school administrator who does not know his community, and who is not aware of the aspirations of his citizens regarding the nature and purpose of schooling for their children, will find himself in difficulty.

On the basis of identified needs, *goals* should be developed. Goals are usually broadly stated and always point directly toward the ultimate meeting of the needs which have been identified.

The next step in the planning process is to break down each goal into its lesser components, more specific in content and narrower in scope. Well-stated *objectives* serve to identify the specific service or end-product which will result and describe some measureable means of determining to what extent the objective has been reached.

After objectives have been identified, *programs* must be developed which are designed to achieve them. Well planned administrative and operational relationships must also be developed for such programs. In addition, alternative approaches should be identified in order to assure arrival at the best possible functional arrangement.

Finally, the *resources* necessary to carry out the programs need to be identified—i.e., equipment, materials, personnel, and funds

for the current fiscal year and for a longer time span, say five years.

The Dimensions of SCR

It must be recognized in the planning process that, basically, the school-community relations program is a study in communication. Reduced to its essentials, communication in this context is concerned with *who* says *what* to *whom* through which *channels*, with what *effect?*

In identifying the scope and complexity of the communication program, let us elaborate on the underlined words in the above paragraph.

Who

The size of the school system is a controlling factor as to who is responsible for communicating to the public. In a highly centralized system, the school superintendent may serve as his own public relations man, or such duties may be given to an assistant superintendent as a supplementary duty. In most large school systems, a full-time professional director, responsible to the superintendent, assumes that function.

There are two basic types of PR operations: institutional (system-wide), and decentralized (local school or area). The nature of assigned duties and the community's characteristics should determine which type or what combination of the two is most desirable.

An institutional (or centralized) program can be defined as a program emanating from the central professional staff. This is the most common type of practice which involves annual reports, speakers' bureau, commercial media contacts, and the like.

The decentralized program emanates from local schools or groups other than the central professional staff. Such a program should, however, be coordinated by the communications director. Illustrations of the decentralized approach are: "community-school" practices, citizen participation in poverty programs, local school publications, etc.

An information program deliberately built upon the decentralized approach is operating successfully in a large school system

on the West Coast. The building principal is the key agent in the program. A principal from each of the 8 administrative areas is placed on a committee: levy-coordinating committee; exhibits committee, etc. Each year the principals rotate from one committee to another. Teachers from the same areas are assigned to work on these committees under the direction of the principals.

The advantages of this approach include well-defined responsibilities and on-the-job, in-service training. Recognizing that school principals have little time, the duties of these committees are restricted. The committee to place speakers, for example, may schedule only ten speakers a year. What grows out of this experience that is of special value, however, is in-service training in which the principals and teachers learn while in a decision-making capacity. This kind of training builds through the years a public relations-oriented staff.

A decentralized SCR operation requires skillful coordination and planning. It is a program directed toward long-range benefits, and it may well prove to be the most effective method of organizing SCR in large systems.

What

What about content selection when communicating? Despite Marshall McLuhan's insistence that "the medium is the message" the administrator is ultimately responsible for the *content* of the message which is designed to inform and influence the attitudes of citizens. What do citizens want to know, anyway?

The lay citizen is becoming increasingly sophisticated about the schooling process. Citizens are better educated, more inquisitive about school operation, more ambitious for their children and more demanding of school administrators than they have ever been in the past. Some of the things they want to know from the school are:

- Educational goals and objectives
- The role of education in the society of the future
- Relationship between education and democracy
- Degree of equal educational opportunity for all pupils

- Educational accomplishments, especially in the instructional area
- Values of education
- Instructional technology
- Present status and future need for well-trained teachers
- Long-range financial and curriculum planning
- Long-range cost estimates of education and relation to local taxes
- Current and long-range school construction plans
- Counseling and other specialized pupil services
- Relationship of past, present, and future in school development

In addition, parents are particularly interested in policies and problems in discipline procedures, school lunch and other auxiliary services, education as an investment, educational innovations, results of educational research, and how they can make their views known to the principal and his staff.

Whom

There is no such thing as *the public;* there are many "publics." Recognizing that there is much overlap in the list which follows, those publics include:

- Board of Education
- Staff: administrative, teachers, supporting personnel
- Students
- Alumni
- Educational institutions
- Educational associations
- Related governmental bodies
- Private schools
- PTA members
- School-oriented community organizations

- Anti-school-oriented community organizations
- Commuters
- Parents, non-parents, private school parents, preschool parents
- Cultural organizations
- Ethnic group organizations
- Fraternal organizations
- Industrial and trade organizations
- Religious organizations
- Social clubs
- Occupational clubs
- Study groups
- Foundations and institutes

Channels

The administrator must deal with a spectrum of media and his ability in effectively utilizing them singly and in combination is perhaps the ultimate test of his skill as a communicator. Channels of communication include:[1]

Periodicals and special publications

- Special interest publications (e.g. real estate association magazine)
- Newsletters of special interest groups
- Technical publications
- Daily and weekly newspapers

Radio

- Straight reporting (newsworthy events)
- "Spots" (public service announcements)
- Scheduled programs

[1] The list is adapted from *The Schools and the Community: A Communications Study*, Suburban Area Study Group, Montgomery County, Maryland, 1966.

Documentaries
Talks
Interviews
Discussions
Round tables
Contests

Television

- Educational stations (area-wide)
- Closed-circuit school TV

  Staff briefings
  Announcements
  Interviews
- Commercial stations

Audio-Visual Media

- Tapes, records
- Slides, slide films
- Flip-charts, transparencies
- Movies

Posters and Signs

- Store window cards
- Bumper strips
- Bulletin board materials
- Billboards
- Over-street signs
- Restaurant table tents

School Publications, directed to:

External audience (using commercial media)

- Annual reports
- Periodicals
- Campaign literature
- Budget and finance material
- Articles in technical journals

External audience (school-produced)

- Report cards
- Report card "stuffers"
- Reports to parents (curriculum, guidance, etc.)
- Annual reports
- Special purpose pamphlets

Internal audience

- Superintendent's Report
- Handbook (teacher and student)
- Brochures
- House organs, school or teachers' association (magazine or newsletter)
- Special purpose and incidental
- Student publications (school newspapers, yearbooks, etc.)
- Pamphlets from industry, League of Women Voters, etc.

Exhibits

- In-school
- Out-of-school (libraries, store showrooms, etc.)
- Portable (audio-visual, demonstration models, etc.)
- Local industry displays

Direct mail

- Information mailing
- Persuasive mailing
- Reminder items

Surveys and polls

- Special purpose surveys (citizen and/or staff conducted)
- Interagency cooperative surveys (school nurse, welfare, etc.)
- Block representative home visits
- Community surveys (student-conducted)
- Profile of community talent and resources: citizen resources, citizen specialists, cooperative business-industry, organizations with relevant activities

- Census tract data; tabulated and interpreted for school needs

Service and referral

- Telephone inquiries
- School visitors
- Requests for printed information
- Referral to other sources

Speakers' bureau

- Staff members listing (varied in position, age, sex, etc.)
- Citizen specialist listing
- Special resource speakers listing

Public forum

- School board meetings
- Guest speakers (resource visitors)
- Briefings
- Panel discussions
- Open house
- Budget and other hearings

Advisory groups

- Appointed by Board of Education, special purpose
- Citizen experts as consultants
- Civic groups in area of specialization
- Interagency liaison activities
- Independent study groups

Community relations

- State agency and legislative group cooperation
- Local interagency cooperation
- Group and organization liaison (exchange speakers; visits; tours; education facilities; scholarship funds and other; staff membership in social and fraternal groups; profes-

sional organization relations; industry-sponsored career days and career clinics, etc.

- Staff committee for community conflict detection and recommendations of conflict solutions

Public forum

- Study groups
- PTA meetings
- Lectures
- Discussion panels
- Symposiums
- Committee reports
- Advisory groups
- Father's night
- Preschool conferences
- Informal group meetings with principal
- Group classroom conferences with teacher
- Informal parent luncheons and daytime visits
- National Education Week
- Films and drama
- Independent community organization meetings

Community school practices

- Community coordinating councils
- Lyceums
- Concerts
- Adult forums
- Lectures
- Resource visitors
- Excursions
- Films
- Field trips
- Adult education programs

- Recreational activities
- Social activities
- School plant use by local groups

Home-school communications

- Pupil reporting and conferences
- Supplementary notes on report card
- Report card "stuffers"
- Letters and notes to parents
- Telephone conversations
- News announcements or bulletins
- Start-to-school and other booklets
- Newsletters (PTA, school, classroom)
- Special purpose (students' choice of subjects, curriculum design, etc.)
- Reprints of articles
- Recommended reading lists
- Question box for parents

Home-school intervisiting

- Home visits
- School visits (parents' night, back-to-school night, open house)
- Conferences (individual and group)
- Resource visitors
- Room mothers
- Weekly visiting day (small group of invited parents)
- Informal teas
- Parent-child picnics
- Parent work-planning sessions
- Home visits by school nurse
- One-to-one relationship of guidance personnel with student and parent

- Parent-sponsored "welcome to new teachers"; introduction to the community
- Letters to parents by new school teachers

Miscellaneous (for special occasions)

- Parades
- Dedication exercises in new schools
- Special athletic events
- Sponsored ads, especially by school construction companies and school-supply houses and merchants
- Convocations, assemblies
- Musical programs in the schools
- Open houses
- Special PTA meetings
- Special meetings of fraternal organizations, clubs, etc.
- Education sermons and announcements in church bulletins
- Movie trailers shown in theaters
- Demonstration lessons
- School caravans for officials and community leaders
- Street banners and billboard displays